

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 5, 2013

Dr. Robert A. Petzel
Undersecretary for Health
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Susan P. Bowers
VISN 18 Network Director
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
6950 E. Williams Field Road
Mesa, AZ 85212

George Marnell
Director
New Mexico VA Healthcare System
1501 San Pedro SE
Albuquerque, NM 87108-5128

Dear Dr. Petzel, Ms. Bowers & Director Marnell:

Let us begin by expressing our appreciation to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for working with our offices on several issues affecting access to quality care at the community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in Northern New Mexico. Like you, we believe that New Mexico's veterans have served our country bravely, and they deserve timely access to the best possible health care.

To achieve that goal, we call your attention to various issues that we would like you to address as soon as possible:

I. The Santa Fe Community Based Outpatient Clinic

We have received various complaints from veterans about the need to expand the Santa Fe CBOC. The CBOC's extremely tight quarters have resulted in numerous concerns about quality of care, patient confidentiality, a limited range of services, laboratory issues, and accessibility for disabled veterans. While the clinic's staff is doing the best it can under these extremely difficult circumstances, it is clear that they are constrained by the CBOC's lack of space. Indeed, the VA has acknowledged that the Santa Fe CBOC is undersized and in need of expansion.

As the VA works to resolve long-term space issues, we would like to know what improvements will be made at the current location to ensure patient confidentiality, ensure group access to telehealth services, and promote safety and accessibility for disabled veterans.

Additionally, we have received complaints from veterans about the antiquated phone equipment and services at the current Santa Fe CBOC. As a result, some veterans have reported difficulty in securing appointments as well as in filling and refilling prescriptions. As you investigate this issue, please inform us of the immediate steps the VA will take to improve the phone system.

In developing solutions to the long-term space issues and to meet the medical needs of the growing veteran population, is the VA considering a new location for the CBOC? If so, where will it be located and how are you determining size and accommodation requirements to address issues of timely access to best practices (including group telehealth services), confidentiality, and safety? Please provide an updated written timeline that includes dates for the request for proposals, a lease being awarded, completion of the new clinic, and the clinic opening.

The current location of CBOC is next door to the Vet Center and provides a one-stop-shop allowing veterans to coordinate appointments between the two health care centers. Veterans benefit greatly from this coordination. Is the VA taking the benefits of the CBOC-Vet Center proximity into account as it makes long-term plans so that this coordination of care can continue?

We would also like to know what plans are in place to hold an informational town hall and listening session for the Santa Fe veterans' community. We appreciate that you have worked with our congressional offices on similar town halls for the Raton clinic and believe strongly that the community benefits from greatly from this type of communication.

II. The Raton CBOC

Veterans in Raton have long had concerns about the inadequacy of the CBOC facility and the staffing levels there. With regard to staffing, what is the current full-time equivalent of physicians, and current FTEs for other healthcare providers at the Raton CBOC? Given the current utilization rate, are current staffing levels at the Raton CBOC meeting VA staffing standards? Please provide a written timeline for when the Raton CBOC will be fully staffed. When the new Raton CBOC opens, will the VA need to hire additional medical staff to meet the possible increase in utilization? While we recognize that sometimes retaining staff in rural areas is challenging, we expect that processes are in place to anticipate and address this challenge. What state, VISN, and national-level VA oversight and monitoring processes are in place to ensure CBOC staffing shortage issues are addressed in a timely manner?

The New Mexico congressional delegation has been told for years that a new CBOC in Raton was imminent, though it has yet to open. Please provide an updated written timeline for finalizing the designs, permitting, breaking ground, and the new Raton clinic's opening. In addition, will you please clarify who is responsible for the cost of developing and maintaining the road needed to access the new clinic? What type of road will this be and how are the VA and developer of the clinic continuing to work with the City of Raton on the engineering of this road?

Similar to the Santa Fe CBOC, we have received complaints about the phone system at the Raton CBOC, which has led to veterans having trouble making appointments and in filling and refilling prescriptions. As you investigate this issue, please inform us of the immediate steps the VA plans to take to improve the phone system.

III. The Gallup CBOC

We have been informed that the Gallup CBOC is not fully staffed. Please provide a written timeline for when the Gallup CBOC will be fully staffed as well as what plans for coverage are currently in place to ensure that the CBOC is adequately staffed in the interim? Additionally, we

understand that the VA is aware of the need to expand the Gallup CBOC. Please provide an updated written timeline that includes dates for the request for proposals, a lease being awarded, completion of the new clinic, and the clinic opening.

IV. The Las Vegas CBOC and Taos CBOC

We have also been informed that there is currently no full time physician at the Las Vegas CBOC and that this location experiences high turnover rate for physicians and nurse practitioners. Additionally, we have heard from veterans in Taos about high staff turnover at the Taos CBOC. Again, we appreciate information on state, VISN, and national-level VA oversight and monitoring processes in place to ensure CBOC staffing shortages and turnover issues are addressed in a timely manner.

Additionally, we are told that scheduling an appointment in Las Vegas can take a long time, sometimes resulting in veterans relying on local congressional offices to intervene and support their efforts to get a timely appointment. Will you please identify the obstacles to timely appointments and share the information with our offices?

V. Other Questions and Concerns

We appreciate your input on several other areas of concern raised by our constituents. What criteria does the VA use to determine whether a CBOC should be VA Staffed or contracted out? Several CBOCs in our state have recently been contracted out to Health Net. What process is in place to ensure that VA standards of care and staffing requirements are met at these contracted CBOCs? What standards are in place to ensure that veterans are able to schedule appointments in a timely manner?

Given increased access to telemedicine services, will you please clarify under what circumstances it is necessary for veterans in Southern New Mexico to travel either to El Paso or Albuquerque for specialty care?

Finally, we have received ongoing concerns about a lack of access to mental health treatment and services for veterans in southern New Mexico. Please describe the access to mental health services and treatment offered to veterans across the state, including Southern New Mexico. Does the breadth of care, quality of care, and behavioral health staffing levels meet VA standards in all facilities? If not, what plans are in place to address these issues?

Again, we appreciate the VA's commitment to providing high quality care to all New Mexico veterans. We look forward to your response and a continued constructive partnership in addressing our veterans' needs.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
Member of Congress